The one who greets the morning

—“Want to fix your indecisive heart for me

But every time I try, my heart just ends up feeling lonely.”

CDGuntee - □□□□□□□

The room was locked at a freezing, over-air-conditioned temperature to block out the oppressive Bangkok heat, but the cold offered no comfort. Est sat alone in his high-end condo, the silence too loud, pressing against his eardrums like a physical weight.

His phone lay face-up on the charcoal linen sheets, the screen glowing with notifications he couldn't bring himself to open. He saw Hong's text in the group chat the message that everything was okay, that he and Nut were together. He saw the sudden radio silence from Tui and Lego, their usual flood of messages replaced by an absence that felt like a verdict.

He felt the collective shift of the group hardening against him, cementing his role as the outsider.

Est opened the text box to reply to Hong's message. His fingers hovered over the keyboard, but no words came. What could he possibly say? I'm sorry I used your best friend as a puzzle piece? I'm sorry I ghosted everyone?

He typed and deleted. Typed and deleted. The empty text box mocked him.

Finally, he locked the phone and threw it face down on the mattress, as if the physical act of not seeing the screen could erase the mounting guilt.

Sitting alone in the artificially cold room, Est was forced to confront the memory of that night—the night it all started, the night he had decided to follow Hong to a party, seeking something real in a life that felt like a carefully curated performance.

He remembered how easy it had seemed back then. Hong—loud, silver-haired, radiating a chaotic but magnetic warmth—had dragged him into this orbit without asking for a polished version of Est. For the first time in years, Est had felt like he could just be.

He had accepted the invitation because he wanted to be warm, too. He wanted to see what it felt like to belong to a circle that didn't require a perfectly curated mask.

Est had taken his seat in the background, smiled his quiet smile, and decided right then to be their observer—believing that if he just kept quiet, he could enjoy the warmth without ever getting burned. But the night had shifted. The alcohol had

loosened something in him, and the desperate need to feel anchored to another human being had overwhelmed his usual defenses.

Est tried to piece the details of that night back together, but his brain treated it like water slipping through fingers. He remembered the taste of cheap alcohol and the sudden, desperate need to feel real.

When he tried to picture the face of the person lying next to him, it remained completely blank in his memory. He remembered hands—careful, reverent hands. He remembered the rhythm of breathing, the warmth of skin against his, and a profound sense of mutual loneliness. But the identity was gone, erased by panic and alcohol and his mind's desperate attempt to protect itself.

The frustration of not being able to fully remember the person he had given a piece of himself to, combined with the guilt of ghosting the group chat and using Nut as a distraction, caused something inside him to snap.

He didn't scream or make a scene. Instead, he cried.

The tears came silently at first, hot and unstoppable. He hadn't cried like this since the agonizing night in his old apartment—the one he used to share with Kai. He hadn't cried since the exact moment Kai had cheated on him, packed his things, and walked out the door forever.

Kai had left him completely hollow, robbing Est of even the closure of an argument, leaving him entirely unable to yell, scream, or demand answers for what he had done.

The tears eventually ran dry, leaving his throat burning and his chest feeling hollowed out, as if the crying spell had scraped away the last of his carefully constructed armor.

Est realized that his silence hadn't saved him from anything. It had only turned him into a ghost in the lives of the only people who had ever offered him warmth without demanding a price.

He couldn't remember the face of the person he had clung to in the dark, and the guilt of that blank space still throbbed like an open wound. But the tears had washed away the panic, leaving behind a exhausted clarity.

The night was finally arriving, wrapping Bangkok in a dark, humid blanket, bringing an end to the agonizing day he had spent hiding from his own skin.

The heavy Bangkok morning heat vanished the moment William climbed the narrow stairs to Lego's apartment and punched in the security code. As soon as the door clicked open, the change was immediate.

The tension that used to hang in the air had dissipated, replaced by something lighter, warmer, and completely renewed.

Sprawled across the living room rug was Lego, entirely in morning mode. He wore a pastel-pink pajama set with an oversized knit sweater, his bare feet idly tracing patterns in the air. His long black hair was loose, falling over his shoulders in soft waves.

At the sound of the door, Lego's face instantly lit up. He sat up halfway, a massive smile breaking across his features.

"Liam! I missed you!" he cheered with easy, uncontained affection.

Before William could even set the coffees down, Tui emerged from the kitchen. He carried a reusable mug, his backpack slung over one shoulder, ready for the day.

"Hi, Liam," Tui greeted him warmly, stepping up to give William a genuine half-hug. "Glad you dropped by."

"Hey," William replied, his sharp eyes immediately catching a fresh, unmistakable dark bite-mark high on Tui's neck, just above his collar. William bit back a knowing smirk. "Looks like it's been a good morning."

A sudden flush crept up Tui's cheeks, but he didn't pull away. Instead, he crouched down on the rug right next to Lego, his expression melting. Tui reached out, his fingers tangling gently in Lego's messy, sleep-tousled hair to tilt his face upward.

"I'm heading out now, love," Tui murmured, his voice dropping into an intimate, low register meant only for the two of them.

Lego leaned directly into the touch, his eyes fluttering shut for a second before looking up with deep affection. "Don't work too hard. Come back straight to me."

Tui smiled softly, leaning down to press a deep, lingering kiss against Lego's lips, then another on his forehead, and one more right against his jawline—so completely absorbed in each other that William found himself smiling.

Pop-locking his backpack into place, Tui stood up with a fond sigh, giving Lego a final, possessive look. "And make sure you eat something other than just tea for breakfast today. Both of you. Liam, look after my boy."

"Always do," William chuckled, waving as Tui finally pulled himself away and headed for the door. "Have a good day, P'Tui."

Once the front door clicked shut, a lazy morning light filtered through the balcony curtains, illuminating the room in a warm, amber glow. William let out a heavy sigh of pure relief to see his friends so happy and dropped his broad frame onto the plush rug right next to Lego.

Lego didn't hesitate. He crawled right over and flopped his head directly down onto William's thigh, treating his leg like a pillow while stretching his bare feet out toward the couch.

Without looking, Lego reached blindly into the air, wrapping his fingers around the plastic cup William had brought, and took a massive sip through the straw.

Instantly, Lego's face twisted into an exaggerated grimace. He pulled away with a loud gasp. "Ugh! Very bitter!" Lego whined, sticking his tongue out.

William burst into a hearty laugh, the bright sound grounding the quiet room. "It's an Americano, Lego," William explained with an amused shake of his head. "No sugar. Real coffee."

Lego rolled over onto his back, looking straight up into his friend's face with a comically deep pout. "You and your dirt water," Lego mumbled, wrinkling his nose. But his bright smile completely betrayed his complaints. He reached down and nudged the sweating cup away, fully content to just lie there.

"You're just spoiled by all those sweet fruit teas," William teased gently, lightly tugging a lock of Lego's hair. "How are you feeling today, anyway? Really?"

Lego let out a soft, contented hum. "Like I can finally breathe, Liam. It's weird. I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, but Tui is just... he's all mine now. He's really here." He turned his eyes back to William, deeply soft and incredibly grateful. "Thank you for always listening to me when I was spinning out about him."

William's expression softened. He rested his hand on Lego's shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "You don't ever have to thank me for that, Lego. I'm just happy you're happy. You deserve this."

"We all do," Lego said softly, reaching up to pat William's hand. "Now come on, my stomach is literally growling. Feed me."

With a collective laugh, the boys dragged themselves up from the floor, padding into the cozy kitchen area to whip up a comforting breakfast spread.

Lego led the way, his bare feet sliding softly across the tiles as he unboxed a bakery box of slightly squished muffins he had picked up the afternoon before.

"They have character," Lego declared with a grin, placing a blueberry muffin on a shared plate.

William stepped into his usual role as the grounding force, boiling water and assembling two generous bowls of warm, steaming oatmeal topped with a bright medley of fresh fruit and a handful of mixed nuts.

"I'm glad Hong and Nut are sorting things out, too," Lego admitted, his voice

dropping into a rare, vulnerable tone as he watched the kettle steam. He hopped up to sit on the kitchen counter, swinging his bare legs back and forth. He paused, taking a slow sip of his freshly steeped tea. "Do you have university today?"

William shook his head, transferring the warm oatmeal into bowls. "Actually, I'm going to the company where Hong works. It's just as a part-time assistant. The university and Hong's manager helped me out," William said, setting the bowls down on the table.

Lego's eyes widened. "Wait, really? Liam, that's huge! Why are you just mentioning this now?"

"It all came together pretty fast," William said with a modest smile, bringing his coffee over. "I didn't want to make a big deal out of it."

"It is a big deal," Lego insisted, hopping down from the counter and sliding into the chair next to him, nudging William's shoulder. "Hong's manager doesn't just hire anyone. You're going to be amazing."

William laughed softly, the rich sound filling the sunlit kitchen.

They sat side-by-side at the small dining table, bathed in the rich, golden morning light flooding through the window. True to Tui's strict orders, Lego happily skipped his usual routine of just tea, tearing off a piece of the blueberry muffin and carefully mixing the sweet berries into his bowl of oatmeal, humming in absolute satisfaction.

Across from him, William cradled his steaming mug of bitter black Americano, the rich aroma swirling gently into the sweet, domestic scents of the breakfast table.

"Eat up," William murmured kindly, pushing the fruit bowl closer to Lego. "Tui will interrogate me later if you only eat two bites."

Lego laughed, his eyes curving into affectionate crescents. "I am eating! See? Real food. It's nice, sitting here like this. Just us. I feel like it's been a while since we just hung out without a massive crisis hanging over our heads."

When they finished breakfast, William helped Lego clear the table. He noticed that Lego didn't eat everything, but he preferred not to say anything since Lego was in such a wonderful mood.

Soon, Lego was packing his gear bag for an afternoon practice session with his circus silks. He began stretching on the living room rug, highly flexible and completely relaxed. William sat cross-legged on the floor next to him, helping Lego untangle a length of rigging hardware and carefully checking the stitching on the straps.

Lego casually draped his legs across William's lap, completely at ease. As they talked further about how relieved Lego was that Tui had finally stopped overthinking, Lego's expression softened. He looked closely at William's tight, exhausted face.

"Hong and Nut are okay now. Tui and I are okay," Lego said, his voice dropping into a gentle, searching tone. "But you look like you're carrying a bomb, Will. What's going on?"

William was forced to hold his breath to keep from spilling the truth about Est. He realized Lego was giving him a totally safe space to confess his own mess, but he was still too terrified to break the peace.

The silence in the room stretched thin, suddenly so fragile that the soft creak of the floorboards beneath them felt amplified.

William focused entirely on his hands, his fingers working with a mechanical, deliberate precision as he checked the heavy steel carabiners and loops of the rigging straps. He didn't look up. He couldn't. If he met Lego's perceptive, soft gaze right now, the sheer weight of the truth would shatter his throat.

Lego's legs remained draped heavily across his lap, warm and grounding, a physical reminder of the uncomplicated, safe brotherhood they had built over the years. Lego didn't push; he just stayed there, a quiet, patient anchor in his pink pajamas, waiting for William to finally drop the shield.

"I think I'll forget him eventually," William finally spoke, but his voice sounded dull, like he'd already given up. "Est was just a one-night stand. We didn't even get close during these months when Hong started bringing him along on our outings."

"A one-night stand?" Lego repeated softly, his thumb idly tracing the back of William's hand. "You don't look like the world is ending over a one-night stand, Liam. And you don't carry a secret until you're completely bruised under the eyes if it didn't mean anything to you."

William's jaw clenched so hard it ached. "It doesn't matter," he whispered, his voice cracking. "He's ghosting everyone. He doesn't remember... or he doesn't want to. I'm just the observer, remember? I shouldn't have crossed the line."

"Hey," Lego cut in gently, his voice incredibly tender. "Don't do that. Don't minimize how you feel just because it's messy."

William looked up, his dark eyes meeting Lego's light-colored lenses. "What if he never remembers? What if I was just—just background noise to him?"

Lego shifted closer, sitting up fully now, his hands coming to rest on William's shoulders. "Then he's an idiot," Lego said firmly. "But I don't think he is. I think he's

scared. Just like you are."

William let out a shaky breath. "I don't know what to do."

"You be honest," Lego said simply. "When the time is right, you tell him the truth. And if he can't handle it, then that's on him. But you deserve to stop carrying this alone, Liam. You deserve to be seen."

Lego didn't offer any grand advice beyond that. He didn't tell William what to do, nor did he force him to make a plan. Instead, he simply shifted closer, closing the small physical gap between them on the rug, and wrapped his arms securely around William's broad, rigid shoulders.

He pulled William into a tight, unyielding embrace, burying his face against William's neck. They stayed like that on the sunlit floor, tangled in circus silks and heavy hardware.

"I'm sorry," William whispered, his voice breaking. "I didn't mean to—"

"You didn't do anything wrong," Lego said firmly, his voice muffled against William's shoulder. "You're allowed to have feelings, Liam. You're allowed to want someone. You're allowed to be messy and scared."

The central air conditioning in the main workspace of the entertainment company was set to an aggressive, sub-zero chill, completely sealing out the suffocating mid-day Bangkok humidity.

For Est, however, the artificial cold offered no comfort.

He sat in the corner of the busy studio, fingers wrapped tightly around a lukewarm cup of black coffee, feeling entirely skinless. The aftershocks of his silent breakdown from the night before still throbbed behind his eyes, leaving his throat raw and his chest completely hollowed out.

He was wearing his mask today—a perfectly tailored, minimalist linen shirt and a calm, unbothered expression—but underneath, he felt like glass. Every laugh from a staff member, every screech of a rolling wardrobe rack, made him flinch internally.

"Everyone, focus up for a second!" The sharp, commanding voice of P'Kwan, Hong's longtime manager, cut through the ambient noise of the studio. P'Kwan marched into the center of the room, clapping her hands to gather the attention of the scattered crew, stylists, and models.

"This is William," P'Kwan announced, gesturing to the tall, broad-shouldered young man standing just a step behind her. "He's a photography student joining us as a temporary, part-time assistant. Make sure you don't break him on his first day."

A few staff members offered polite nods and murmurs of welcome.

Est, sitting on a stool near the back backdrop, raised his eyes to look at the newcomer. His breath hitched. Hong's friend. The quiet, observant guy who was always sitting in the background of their group outings over the last few months.

Est's survival instinct kicked in instantly. His expression frozen into a mask of polite indifference, he offered William a tiny, superficial nod. He deliberately chose to act as if they were total strangers, as if those shared outings, those casual dinners with Hong, had never happened.

William met his gaze. His sharp, dark eyes didn't waver. He didn't smile, and he didn't call Est out. He simply accepted the cold front with a slow, almost imperceptible hardening of his jaw, acknowledging the boundary Est had abruptly slammed down between them.

"Alright, William, get straight to it," P'Kwan said, patting his shoulder before running off to answer a ringing phone. "Go help the camera crew with the lighting grids."

William immediately went to work. He didn't complain about the heavy labor. He bent down to tape down a chaotic tangle of thick black power cords crossing the studio floor, ensuring the path was safe for the shoot.

Every movement was deliberate entirely professional.

Est watched him through the fringe of his hair, his heart doing a strange, erratic dance against his ribs. The silence between them felt louder than the music blasting from the studio speakers. Suddenly, the heavy glass doors of the studio swung open.

Hong walked in.

His silver hair practically radiated beneath the fluorescent lights, and he was laughing loudly, tossing a playful remark over his shoulder to a makeup artist following him. The familiar, chaotic warmth he always brought into a room immediately shifted the atmosphere.

Est felt a desperate, involuntary surge of hope. He sat up slightly, his lips parting to speak, to apologize, to break the awful radio silence from the group chat.

But as Hong swung his eyes across the room, his gaze landed on Est.

In a fraction of a second, the magnetic warmth vanished from Hong's face. His expression hardened into something icy and completely closed off.

Without a single word, without even a nod of acknowledgment, Hong deliberately turned his back on Est, stepping over a newly taped cord to greet the head photographer on the opposite side of the room.

The rejection was surgical. It was a public, freezing statement.

Est felt the blood drain from his face. The collective shift of the room felt like it was cementing his role as the ultimate outsider. He shrank back onto his stool, his knuckles turning white around his coffee cup.

He didn't notice that William had seen the entire exchange.

The heavy studio music swelled, a pounding, atmospheric beat that was supposed to bring energy to the room but only served to drown out Est's escalating panic. Hearing the head photographer call his name, Est swallowed the thick lump in his throat, forced his shoulders back, and stepped out onto the glossy white floor.

In an instant, the transformation was terrifyingly flawless.

The raw, skinless boy who had been trembling over a cold coffee cup vanished. In his place stood the untouchable model—eyes sharp and heavy-lidded, jawline set with a clinical, expensive coldness, posture perfect.

He walked right onto the marker.

And as he did, he looked right past William.

William was standing just two feet away, holding a digital light meter and a backup lens, waiting to assist the photographer with the initial readings.

William felt a sharp, physical sting in his chest. His fingers tightened around the leather strap of the light meter until his knuckles turned white.

A stranger.

It was one thing to guess that Est was distant; it was another to watch him execute it with such practiced, icy precision.

William looked at the elegant slope of Est's neck, the precise line of his collarbone beneath the linen shirt, and the memory of that suffocating Bangkok night flashed violently behind his eyes.

He remembered the heavy rhythm of Est's breathing, the desperate way those same hands had clung to his shoulders in the dark, seeking warmth that neither of them could name. They had shared a bed. They had shared hours of quiet, intense vulnerability. And now, Est was looking through him like glass.

The shoot dragged on for hours beneath the unrelenting glare of the studio strobes. Est performed flawlessly, delivering exactly the raw, haunting heartbreak the

photographer wanted, but the moment the shutter stopped clicking, his professional mask went right back up.

Yet, beneath that perfect veneer, his eyes constantly tracked William's broad frame. He watched William silently lift heavy equipment, tape down thick cords, and move like a quiet shadow through the background.

Every time Est looked away from William, he was met with a different kind of silence.

Hong spent the entire afternoon moving through the studio like a localized storm of energy, laughing with the stylists and chatting with P'Kwan. But whenever his path naturally crossed Est's, the disinterested facade snapped into place.

Hong wouldn't look at him, wouldn't acknowledge him, completely icing Est out and leaving him stranded in his own suffocating isolation. By the time P'Kwan finally called a wrap, the studio evaporated into a flurry of crew members packing up gear.

Exhausted, his throat dry and his chest feeling entirely hollowed out, Est slipped away toward the bank of elevators, desperate to escape.

The heavy metal doors slid open, and Est stepped into the mirrored carriage. Just before the doors could slide shut, a large hand caught the rubber edge. William stepped inside, a heavy bag of cables slung over his shoulder. The doors closed with a soft click, trapping them together in the small, moving box.

The central air conditioning hummed a low, monotonous tune, making the silence between them feel deafening. Est immediately locked his posture, staring straight ahead at the metallic doors, wrapping his perfectly curated, professional mask around himself like a shield. He treated William like a total stranger, a mere face on the crew.

William, still deeply hurting from Lego's confirmation that Est had been ghosting everyone, felt a sharp, bitter sting at the behavior.

Fine. If Est wanted him to be a ghost, he would match that distance.

He stared at the floor indicator, his expression hardening into something strictly professional.

"Which floor are you heading to?" William asked, his voice a flat, polite drone.

Est didn't answer immediately. "Lobby," Est said quietly, his voice barely above a whisper.

The professional facade was stretching so thin it was about to snap. The elevator chimed, the doors sliding open on the main lobby corridor.

As if on cue, Hong walked down the hallway just a few paces behind P'Kwan. He was dressed in his street clothes, his silver hair catching the lobby lights, his usual boisterous warmth completely absent.

Hearing the elevator doors open, Hong glanced over.

For a fraction of a second, his eyes locked straight onto Est. His expression hardened into something cold and without a single word or nod, he walked right past the elevator bank, leaving the building without looking back.

Est flinched. His perfect model mask cracked for a split second, a sharp, ragged gasp escaping his throat as the surgical rejection cut right through his remaining defenses.

William watched the exchange, he stepped out of the elevator first. He stopped just outside the doors, turning around to face Est, who was still frozen inside the carriage.

The formal assistant persona vanished, replaced by the low, steady, grounding rumble of his real voice.

"You look at me like I'm a stranger because you're terrified of what Hong will think," William said softly, his dark eyes fixed on Est's trembling form. He didn't sound angry—just incredibly tired, carrying a heavy, protective sadness. "But that won't fix anything, Est. Just talk to him. Hong forgives more easily than you think."

Est's shoulders went rigid. "That's not—"

"It's okay," William interrupted, his voice dropping even lower. "I get it."

Est swallowed hard, the lump in his throat tasting like copper. He finally stepped out of the elevator, the heavy glass doors of the lobby framing the dark, rain-slicked Bangkok streets outside.

The corporate mask didn't just crack; it fell away entirely, leaving him looking devastatingly young and exhausted.

"Sometimes the kindest thing is the hardest thing, and I don't know which one this is," Est murmured, his voice barely a whisper against the hum of the lobby ventilation. He looked up at William, his defensive posture melting into something raw. "It's not just Hong. Nut won't talk to me either. They haven't spoken to me for days."

William adjusted the heavy strap of the cable bag on his shoulder, his heart aching at the sheer vulnerability radiating from the older boy.

He didn't walk away. Instead, he guided Est toward a quiet, dimly lit lounge area near the back exit, away from the lingering security staff. They sat down on the low

leather chairs, the space between them filled with a strange, heavy gravity.

"I messed up, William," Est admitted quietly, staring down at his hands. He was desperately trying to find a footing, completely unaware that the boy sitting across from him was the very anchor he thought he had lost to the dark. "The night it all started... the night I decided to follow Hong out, I was just so desperate to feel something real. But afterward, I panicked. I panicked so hard that I used Nut as a distraction just to keep the focus off what I had done. I let everyone think I was fine, that I was just the quiet observer in the background."

William held his breath, the irony tearing at his chest. He sat perfectly still, listening to Est confess the inner workings of a night William remembered in agonizing, vivid detail.

"I tried to piece it back together," Est continued, his voice cracking slightly as he looked at William, pleading for understanding. "The physical details of that night... my brain treats it like water slipping through fingers. I remember the humidity pressing against the open window. I remember the taste of cheap alcohol and this profound, mutual loneliness. But when I try to picture the face of the person lying next to me, it remains completely blank. The identity is gone."

William's hand tightened on the armrest of his chair. He had to force his jaw to lock to keep from shouting the truth, to keep from breaking the fragile peace.

He realized Est was giving him the ultimate safe space to confess his own mess, but the terror of rejection kept him pinned to the leather seat. He couldn't shatter the illusion.

"So you're hiding," William said softly, his voice a steady, grounding presence in the quiet lounge.

"I'm ghosting," Est corrected bitterly, letting out a hollow, self-deprecating laugh. "Because I'm terrified. I thought if I kept quiet, I could enjoy the warmth of Hong's circle without ever getting burned. But my silence didn't save me from anything. It only turned me into a ghost in the lives of the only people who ever offered me warmth without demanding a price. And now, Hong looks at me like I'm radioactive."

William looked at Est's tight, exhausted face, seeing the striking reflection of his own fears. The irony was brutal—they were sitting inches apart, talking about each other, dismantling their walls without even realizing it. They were bonding over the exact same pain: being the permanent "outsiders" who were still trying to figure out how to belong to a world that felt too bright for them.

"Hong is just hurt because he cares," William offered gently, his low rumble anchoring the space between them. "He doesn't hate you, Est. He's just confused by the wall you put up. We all are."

Est looked at him, a faint, genuine softness touching his eyes for the first time all day. "You're a good friend, William. Hong is lucky to have you."

William's chest tightened at the words, at the complete unknowing in Est's eyes.

"If you talk to them, things can surely be fixed," William said, his tone softening into something deeply earnest, yet mixed with a trace of warning. "Hong has a weak heart. He forgives easily. But Lego..." William paused. "Lego is the one who doesn't forgive."

When Est heard that name, a sudden, cold wave of realization washed over him. The air seemed to leave his lungs entirely.

Lego.

Est's mind raced backward, the mention of the name unlocking a flood of memories he had tried to push aside during his weeks of panic. He remembered his chat history with Lego—the countless, unread bubbles sitting frozen on his phone.

He remembered Lego, who had accepted him so easily into the group without a single question or doubt. Lego, who had enthusiastically invited him to his aerial silks show, proudly showing off his passion. Lego, who had opened his home completely, inviting him to eat at his table, and even letting him spend the night in his apartment when Est had nowhere else to turn.

And Est hadn't answered a single one of his messages for over two weeks, completely shutting him out the exact moment he started using Nut as a shield.

The guilt, sharp and heavy, pressed down on Est's chest. He looked at William, his eyes wide with a new, distinct kind of fear. He had been so focused on Hong's public icing and Nut's sudden distance that he hadn't even realized the true casualty of his silence.

He hadn't just protected himself; he had quietly broken the trust of the one person who had offered him a soft place to land.

"I didn't—" Est's voice broke. "I didn't mean to hurt Lego. I just... I didn't know how to face anyone. I thought if I disappeared, it would be easier."

"Easier for who?" William asked gently. "Because it wasn't easier for Lego. He's been worried sick about you. He thought he did something wrong."

Est closed his eyes, a fresh wave of guilt washing over him. "God, I'm such an idiot."

"You're not an idiot," William said firmly. "You're just scared. And scared people make mistakes. But you can fix this, Est. You just have to be brave enough to try."

Est opened his eyes, looking at William with a vulnerability that made William's

heart ache.

"What if they don't forgive me?" Est whispered.

William leaned forward, his expression serious. "Then they don't. But at least you'll know you tried. At least you'll know you didn't just run away."

The dim light of the lounge shielded them from the corporate world outside. Est stared at his trembling fingers, his voice a ragged whisper.

"I just ruin things. Every time someone offers me a normal life, I panic. I hide and break everything before anyone can break me."

"Est, stop." William's low, steady rumble anchored the room, carrying a heavy vulnerability that made Est look up.

William shifted forward, resting his forearms on his knees, cracking open his guarded armor.

"You think you're the only one who doesn't know how to fit in here?" William asked softly, glancing toward the rain-slicked windows. "This city doesn't hand out belonging for free. I didn't have any friends until university when I met Tui. Thanks to him I met Lego. If I hadn't met Tui, I would still be as lonely as I was in my adolescence."

The confession hung in the quiet lounge. Hearing William—the unshakeable giant who moved like a pillar of strength—confess to that hollow loneliness completely dismantled Est's defenses.

The invisible wall vanished.

"You?" Est whispered, genuine confusion breaking through his exhaustion.

"I spent years thinking I was just supposed to be an observer, too," William said gently. "I thought if I didn't get too close, I wouldn't lose anyone. But Tui didn't let me hide. And Lego... Lego just dragged me into the light whether I liked it or not."

William leaned a fraction closer, his dark eyes fixed on Est. "You haven't ruined anything beyond repair, Est. You're just terrified because you've been burned before. But you don't have to be a ghost anymore. You're allowed to be messy, and you're allowed to ask for help."

Est felt something break inside him—not in a painful way, but in the way a dam breaks to finally let the water flow.

"I don't know how to do this," Est admitted, his voice small. "I don't know how to be the person they want me to be."

"They don't want you to be anyone but yourself," William said simply. "That's all

they've ever wanted. Just you. Honest and real and present."

Est looked at William for a long moment, seeing for the first time the genuine kindness in his eyes, the quiet strength that didn't demand anything in return.

"Thank you," Est said finally. "For listening."

William smiled—a small, genuine smile that reached his eyes. "That's what friends do."